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Buddhism in a Value-changing Society

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Buddhism in a Value-changing Society

Sri Lanka is among a number of countries in South Asia that have come under the influence of Buddhism. These countries claim to have traditionally cherished the Buddhist value system. The way of life and the cultural traditions of their people have long been nurtured by it. However, most of us today experience the rapid spread of a global culture which has been undermining the traditional value systems of many nations of the world. Under such circumstances the question naturally arises whether Buddhist values can play a meaningful role in the lives of contemporary man, even in traditionally Buddhist societies. Are Buddhist values becoming decadent and outmoded? In the face of the modern developments in scientific knowledge and technological skill, is it becoming necessary to look for a different set of values to replace the ones traditionally upheld?

What is evident is that the advent of the so-called global culture is threatening to erode traditional values. How could those who still adhere to the message of the Buddha respond to the changes

everywhere taking place?

Values can be approached from two different standpoints. Most social scientists prefer to take the standpoint that may be called sociological relativism in dealing with questions of value in relation to different societies. The social scientist's approach does not involve any absolute standard for judging the goodness or badness of the norms upheld by a particular society. The application of such an approach to examine the existing values of a traditional Buddhist society involves merely a description of the social behaviour of its people and a causal explanation of such behaviour.

One may also take a different approach to values, which is philosophical and largely normative. That is the approach that I prefer to take in this discussion. The question of values is a very complex one. It is sometimes said in philosophical circles that questions of value cannot be settled in the way that questions of fact can be settled. Most of us are aware that there is very wide disagreement over questions of value. Therefore, before I get to the core of this subject, I would like to introduce a few distinctions.

One distinction I wish to make initially is between what we call a statement of fact and what we call a value judgement. The widespread belief today is that

statements of fact are based on empirical observation. Accordingly the domain of facts is considered to come within range of the empirical sciences. So we are accustomed to say that there are empirical facts which scientists discover and on the basis of which they build a certain body of knowledge. In order to do this they use a methodology known as the scientific method.

It is also widely held today that religions do not contain facts. Religious discourse is said to have a different logical structure from that of factual discourse. According to this view, religious discourse, what religions have to tell us, does not consist of facts about the world. This implies that religion has nothing to do with knowledge. Religion does not reveal to us anything that can be considered true or anything that can be known by empirical investigation.

Therefore people who are interested in studying religion are interested mainly in studying anthropological facts about religion. One may consider it illuminating to study the sociology of religion, or intellectually rewarding to study the philosophy of religion. In the sociology of religion one studies the prevalent patterns of religious behaviour observable in societies in which religious beliefs are professed, and general laws are established to explain and predict such behaviour. From this point of view

one may, for example, study the behaviour of religious people in connection with pilgrimage, prayer or worship, and discover general laws that may cut across various religious communities. In the philosophy of religion one may point out how a religious statement differs in its logical structure from a statement in empirical science, by maintaining, for instance, that a religious statement is not falsifiable and therefore has no empirical content.

According to this view the religious statements found in any religion do not consist of any genuine facts. If we bring in Buddhism itself to illustrate this view, one might argue on the basis of the above that the concept of *paṭicca samuppāda* (dependent origination) in Buddhism has nothing to do with facts, truth, or science, for it is a religious concept. Any religious statement containing this concept has nothing to do with empirical truth, but only introduces a kind of religious perspective about life. There is a tendency to apply this analysis to all religions. Its application is not confined to theistic religions like Christianity and Islam which contain the metaphysical concept of God, but is extended to cover a non-theistic religion like Buddhism which in my view is non-metaphysical and has a very deep psychological content.

This is considered the 'non-cognitivist thesis'

regarding the nature of religious language.

According to this thesis, religion is neither true nor false in a factual sense. It has within itself its own criteria of truth and falsity. Religious statements do not compete with statements of science which deal with empirical matters. The criteria of truth or falsity of religious statements apply only within the community of believers of a particular religion.

A similar non-cognitivist thesis is affirmed in connection with value judgements as well. With regard to values it is maintained that our judgments of value—that is, judgments about what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, what we ought to do and ought not to do—are neither true nor false. In other words, values do not describe the nature of things. What follows from this is a relativist view about the nature of values. Values, unlike facts, cannot be proved true or false. Disagreement in the sphere of values is considered ultimately reducible to disagreement in attitudes. This is contrasted with the kind of disagreement that may arise with regard to matters of fact.

This may be explained with an example. Supposing two persons A and B disagree about the morality of imposing the death penalty on people who are found guilty of homicide. This disagreement may sometimes

arise when both of them have a common standard for making moral judgements, but they hold different views about the relevant empirical facts. A may disagree with B because in A's opinion the death penalty functions as a deterrent against a criminal act like homicide and has the effect of reducing this crime in any society in which the penalty is legally imposed, while B holds the opinion that the existence of the death penalty never makes a difference to the incidence of crime.

Such disagreement can be resolved by a more thoroughgoing investigation of the facts. Empirical and scientific methods can be effectively employed to resolve such disagreement. However, if the disagreement between A and B is not based on their beliefs about the empirically observable consequences of the death penalty, but on the moral rightness or wrongness of destroying the life of a criminal as a retributive punishment for his crime, the disagreement becomes one of variance in attitudes.

I said at the beginning that I wish to make certain distinctions. The first distinction that I have already made is between facts and values. The example referred to above raises another question that might interest us, the question of the distinction between beliefs relating to facts and beliefs relating to values. Now, people can have beliefs relating to facts, what

we call factual beliefs. It is quite evident that people's beliefs relating to facts change from time to time. It depends on how much experience people have had, how much empirical data they have gathered in order to come to conclusions about the nature of existence.

So beliefs relating to facts are relative to the degree of empirical investigation people have made into the nature of things. There was a time when people believed that the earth is flat, but they have now given up that belief. People's beliefs regarding facts have changed over time.

People can also have beliefs relating to values, and these too can change. There was a time when slavery was considered to be a valuable institution in society. But today it is almost universally agreed that slavery is bad, that if it exists in any society it ought to be abolished, and that no society should allow slavery to continue. Thus people's beliefs about values also can change.

The subject under investigation in the present discussion is the question of the relationship between Buddhism and changing values. Where does Buddhism stand in a value-changing world? Here, we have admitted in some sense that we are living in a world in which values are changing. In this connection it may be questioned whether values themselves are

changing or whether it is only our beliefs about values that are changing. I made the point that our beliefs about facts do change. But is there a sense in saying that facts changes?

I do not think that we could meaningfully say that facts change. Is it meaningful to say that at the time people thought that the earth was flat, the earth was in fact flat, and today since people believe that the earth is spherical, the earth is in fact spherical? I do not think it is meaningful to say so. So we say that the fact that the earth is spherical remained a fact even when people believed the earth to be flat. But supposing we think about values in the same way: can we say that values have this inflexibility? A value at one time may not be a value at another time. But a fact at one time remains a fact at another time as well.

Buddhism too holds that there are certain facts about the world, certain laws (*niyāmas*), which have remained the same. They do not depend on what people believe and know or what people have discovered. They do not depend on people's views and beliefs. About the nature of causal dependence of things, the Buddha says that the patterns of dependence have remained the same, and whether Buddhas are born or not, phenomena occur in accordance with them. A Buddha's function in respect of these *niyāmas* is to point out the regularities of

events and bring them to the attention of others. Can the same be said about the nature of values?

The Buddha agreed that what people in fact value at different times in the history of human civilization may vary. There are some Buddhist terms that come very close to the English terms used to express values, particularly ethical values—terms like *kusala* and *dhamma*. From the Buddha's point of view what people consider to be right (*kusala* or *dhamma*) at one time—in other words, people's beliefs about what is right at one time—may be different from their beliefs at another time. In the *Aggañña Sutta*, for instance, it is said: "At that time it was commonly accepted as unrighteous, but now it is commonly accepted as righteous (*adhammasammataṃ ... tena samayena hoti tadetarahi dhammasammataṃ*)."

This is recognised in Buddhism as a real possibility. What people believe to be *kusala* today may not have been considered *kusala* in the past. What people actually value is expressed by the words they use to praise things. Their moral values are revealed by the types of behaviour they consider to be honourable and praiseworthy.

In the *Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta*, the Buddha points out that social values can undergo a gradual transformation in such a way that what is considered

to be dishonourable and blameworthy at one time may be considered honourable and praiseworthy at another time: “When people’s life span is reduced to ten years, those who show no respect towards mother, father, recluses, brahmins and the elders in the family will become honoured and praised just as now those who show respect towards mother, father, recluses, brahmins and the elders in the family are honoured and praised (*dāsavassāyukesu bhikkhave manussesu ye te bhavissanti amatteyyā apetteyyā asāmaññā abrāhmaññā na kule jetṭhāpacayino te pujjā bhavissanti pāsaṃsā ca seyyathāpi bhikkhave etarahi metteyyā petteyyā sāmaññā brāhmaññā kule jetṭhāpacayino te pujjā ca pāsaṃsā ca*).” This implies that people’s beliefs about values change. But does the Buddha hold that though people’s beliefs about values may change over time, there are certain values which have universal validity? This is the main question about the nature of values: whether there are some values that can be recognised as core values by which all human beings must live if they are to lead a life of happiness, tranquillity, and well being.

Buddhism answers this question in the affirmative. There is a system of core values which can be discovered by human intelligence and experience, and these have to be upheld at all times if human beings are to lead a decent form of life.

Erich Fromm, a well-known humanistic

psychologist, makes some observations in his work *The Sane Society* which bear closely on the point I am going to raise. He raises the question "Can a society be sick?" and then remarks:

"To speak of a whole society as lacking in mental health implies a controversial assumption contrary to the position of sociological relativism held by most social scientists today...

"To speak of a 'sane society' implies a premise different from sociological relativism. It makes sense only if we assume that there can be a society which is not sane, and this assumption, in turn, implies that there are universal criteria for mental health which are valid for the human race as such, and according to which the state of health of each society can be judged." (p.12)

Fromm wishes to take the position which he refers to as 'normative humanism'. He goes on to say:

"The approach of normative humanism is based on the assumption that, as in any other problem, there are right and wrong, satisfactory and unsatisfactory solutions to the problem of human existence. Mental health is achieved if man develops into full maturity

according to the characteristics and laws of human nature. Mental illness consists in the failure of such development....

“What is so deceptive about the state of mind of the members of a society is the ‘consensual validation’ of their concepts. It is naively assumed that the fact that the majority of people share certain ideas or feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings. Nothing is further from the truth.” (p.14)

What Fromm says about the concept of ‘mental health’ applies equally to the concept of values too. Buddhism can respond to the changing values in a society not from the standpoint of sociological relativism but from the standpoint of normative humanism.

Having this in mind, we may raise the question, “Does Buddhism provide some criterion in order to identify a system of core values?” My belief is that the Buddha did this in the Kālāma Sutta and many other places.

The question as to how we could discover the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, is one which perplexed even those people who lived during the time of the Buddha. This is an area in which diversity of opinion is possible and diversity of

opinion has always been around. Given the conditions during the time in which the Buddha lived, with so many innovative teachers proposing various paths to liberation, with so many different ideologies and life styles, there was much diversity of opinion over how a person can best live his or her life. It was due to this diversity of opinion about the nature of the good life that the Kālāmas were very much puzzled. Many teachers who came to them taught different lifestyles, and set up different goals as worthy of pursuit. The Kālāmas became perplexed because they were presented with mutually contradictory views about the nature of the good life. So they asked the Buddha, “How are we to determine what is really the nature of the good life in the face of this diversity of opinion?”

The Buddha showed them a way of determining the nature of the good life. He said that one should not go by report or tradition, by the authority of others, or by speculative reason. One should make use of one’s own observation and experience about the nature of life and thereby determine what is wholesome (*kusala*) and what is unwholesome (*akusala*). The Buddha asked the Kālāmas to consider a person who is overwhelmed or swayed by greed, hatred or confusion of mind, and determine if that psychological state is conducive to his well being. Can one live a satisfactory life if one is overcome by these

psychological conditions? The Buddha requests the Kālāmas to reflect on this matter.

The Kālāmas agreed that when a person is overwhelmed by greed, it brings very harmful consequences. It does not lead to happiness, tranquillity and peace of mind; it only leads to disturbance. It does not conduce to the well being of the person who is affected by that emotion, nor does it conduce to the well being of those with whom he comes in contact. When greed, hatred or confusion is excited in any human being, that person creates a world of suffering for himself and also a world of suffering for others.

The Buddha says that the roots of evil, immoral or unwholesome behaviour are greed, hatred and delusion. This can be discovered by reflecting on one's experience. There are three ways in which people may act: by thought, word or bodily deed. The best way to find out whether one is properly conducting oneself by thought, word or bodily deed is to reflect on the consequences of that action itself. One needs to consider whether the act performed is leading to harm or injury to oneself, to others, or to both. If any action conduces to harm or injury to oneself, to others or to both, then that action is bad. So the Buddhist value system, or the core values that Buddhism has tried to establish, are based on this criterion. The

consequences to oneself and the consequences to others have been accepted as the basis. What is morally praiseworthy or valuable and what is morally blameworthy and evil are to be distinguished primarily by this criterion.

Using the aforesaid criterion, let us try to see how the changing value system is affecting us today. We see that in the sphere of values there is a very strong tendency to be influenced by general social trends. Especially due to the development of the scientific and technological mentality, it has become almost axiomatic today that 'value questions' are not within the power of any individual to deal with. This implies that values are in some sense mechanistically determined by the socio-economic conditions under which we live. No independent judgment is possible because people act in mechanical ways. Human behaviour is mechanical. Therefore, however much we try to act according to a certain perception of value, we are compelled by the social conditions and the social circumstances to behave in a certain way. The value structures which we try to develop ideologically through religious doctrines and through traditional moral teachings may be acknowledged, but in practical terms people cannot put them into practice in their real life, for the emerging global culture exerts a powerful and irresistible influence on people all over

the world.

This situation has to be faced by the Buddhists themselves. The Buddhists may have a very rational and systematic value system, a very profound theoretical system of values. But can we live by that value system when we are faced with these influences from an alternative global value system? Are we not being carried away by the current and compelled to drift with it? This is the problem we have to face as Buddhists.

We also have become more and more inclined to think that we need to change according to these influences and that there is no point in trying to resist them. We think that the Buddhists themselves have to make adjustments, that we must change according to the times and bring our values into accord with the dominant influences. To use Fromm's description, this is consensual validation in the sphere of values, taking to be valid what most people believe.

The mechanistic view of human behaviour has supported this standpoint to a great extent. In the area of human morality it is suggested that no effort on the part of the individual to change oneself—by reflection, by effort, by mindfulness, by developing the kind of virtues that Buddhism advocates—is going to be successful because the social and material conditions

of life inevitably determine our morality and our value system. Therefore, if from our standpoint as Buddhists we find any deterioration in the value system of the society in which we live, those changes are inevitable however much we try to preserve Buddhist virtues. This is because human behaviour is in some way mechanistically determined by the material conditions of living. So, it is said, the only way to change our value structure is to change the material conditions of life. When material conditions are changed the value system will also change.

Let us reflect, for instance, the way people in this country behave when they compete at a bus halt to get into a bus. There are so few buses that people have to compete to get a seat in the bus. A certain condition has been created. People do not care for the elderly and the weak; it becomes a matter of survival of the fittest. People may speak about concern for the weak and elderly as virtues, but despite the preaching about morality and higher values, people's behaviour depends on the material conditions that prevail in society. This argument is a very strong one. How can we as Buddhists live up to the Buddhist value system when certain material conditions in society work against our efforts to follow that value system?

I think this question is also related to a certain attitude which has developed along with the belief in

mechanical ways of changing human behaviour. It has been so much built into the minds of people that we fail to take cognizance of the fact that we can change ourselves inwardly. The established view is that if we want to change ourselves, we first need to change the outside world. There is no possibility of an inner change unless there is a total change in the external environment. It is only through a change in the external conditions that we can bring about an inner change.

Now if this were true, Buddhism would be reduced to nothing and would have nothing to offer. If it is true that we can bring about a change in people's respect for morality, virtues, and human values only by changing the external conditions, we should cease to preach about morality and kindness and put all our effort into changing the external conditions.

What Buddhism maintains is that we are capable of bringing about a change inwardly. One cannot change all the factors in the outside world in accordance with one's own desires and wants, for the external determinants are too numerous and diverse. People have various psychological tendencies such as jealousy, miserliness and competitiveness. These psychological tendencies are responsible for the breakdown of social morality. However, Buddhism believes that these psychological tendencies, triggered

off by the material conditions of life, can be changed inwardly. They can be changed if we understand our own nature through mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. If we develop our inner selves, we can overcome the outside influences. That is why Buddhism maintains that we can live happily in this world even amidst people who are unhappy. “We can live happily indeed among people who are envious”—*susukhaṃ vata jīvāma, verinesu averino; verinesu manussesu, viharāma averino* (Dhammapada).

The mechanistic or deterministic world view has totally destroyed the sense of individual responsibility. One of the most damaging social attitudes today is the renunciation of individual responsibility. This has resulted in the erosion of the sense of the moral shame and dread (*hiri* and *ottappa*) to do what is wrong. All wrongdoing is justified on the basis of the argument, “Given the conditions that existed, I could not have acted otherwise.” But Buddhism is not for those who wish to resign themselves to such a deterministic mode of thinking. Buddhism is a system which affirms the efficacy of the human will to overcome conditions that determine one’s choices. It insists on the importance of swimming against the current (*paṭisotagāmi*).

Buddhism teaches that the individual is free to overcome external influences through the

development of mindfulness, through the development of one's inner nature without waiting for all the external conditions to change. The Buddhist viewpoint is that we cannot bring about a change in human values by waiting for external conditions to change. It is human beings themselves who have to change external conditions. If the change does not start within ourselves we will enter into a vicious circle in which external conditions determine our inner nature and our defiled inner nature sustains the oppressive external conditions. We will be imprisoned within this vicious circle.

This is largely what is happening today. People are not aware that they have to change inwardly, that they must reduce their greed in order to overcome their problems both at the inner level of their being as well as at the societal level. In order to ameliorate the human condition at the level of interpersonal relationships, at the level of social interaction between social groups, and at the level of interaction between nations, it has become necessary for us to change inwardly.

People do not realise that the problems that we confront result from the three roots of evil which the Buddha considered the basis of all human madness. If we do not realise this we will be perpetually caught up in this vicious circle. The ecological problems, the

environmental crisis, the problems of international relations, the problems of poverty, civil war and social conflicts are all due to a lack of awareness about the roots of all evil. It is this mechanistic view, popularised by the materialistic, mechanistic, technological and technocratic mentality, that has created a value crisis in the contemporary world. The only way this value crisis can be overcome is by resorting to the Buddhist solution. This involves going back to the roots of moral evil and tackling them systematically with the methods that the Buddha had made known to the world many centuries ago.

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